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CLAIMS

1. A steering system release device for a motor vehicle equipped with electric power-assisted steering comprising, on the one hand, a locking mechanism (9) acting on the steering column (4) or on another part of the steering system (2), and, on the other hand, in combination with the electric assist motor (10) for the steering system (2), control means (12) which receive signals (S2) from at least one vehicle status and/or initiating event detector (15) so as to activate the electric assist motor (10) and to rotate the steering column (4) or translationally drive or otherwise move another part of the steering system (2), through the action of this electric motor (10), until a zero torque or load or a virtually zero residual torque or load has been achieved, in return for which the locking mechanism (9) can be released, the vehicle status and/or initiating event detector being a detector (15) which detects the insertion of an ignition key or of a magnetic card or other means used for starting the vehicle, characterized in that the activation of the electric assist motor (10) for releasing the steering system (2) is automatically interrupted by the control means (12) after a predetermined time (t) in the event that the zero or virtually zero torque or load has not been achieved after this time (t).

2. The steering system release device as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the activation of the electric assist motor (10) is automatically reversed by the control means (12) after a first predetermined time (t) in order to rotate the steering column (4) or move another part of the steering system (2) in the opposite direction to the initial direction until a zero or virtually zero torque or load has been created on the locking mechanism (9) or until another predetermined time (t') has been reached, this in the event that the

zero or virtually zero torque or load has not been achieved after the first predetermined time (t).

3. The steering system release device as claimed in claim 1 or 2, characterized in that the electric assist motor (10) is not activated if the torque or load on the locking mechanism (9) is zero or virtually zero at the time when release of the steering system (2) is requested.

4. The steering system release device as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 3, characterized in that it comprises a warning indicator (14), such as an indicating light, designed to warn of the impossibility of releasing the steering system (2) on completion of the automatic procedures.

5. The steering system release device as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 4, characterized in that the control means (12) receive a signal from a sensor detecting the position of the steering system (2), such as a sensor detecting the angular position of the steering column (4), or a sensor detecting the position of another part of the steering system, and in that these control means (12) are designed to compare the signal from said position sensor with a predetermined value corresponding to at least one position in which the steering column (4) or another part of the steering system (2) is immobilized by the locking mechanism (9) and to then determine the initial direction of rotation in which the electric assist motor (10) is driven.

6. The steering system release device as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 5, characterized in that the control means, which intervene to activate the electric assist motor (10) as they receive and process the signals (S1, S2) from the vehicle status and initiating event detectors (15) and from the torque or position sensor (13), are formed by an electronic computer (12).